

CHAPTER XXVI: U.S. COAST GUARD STATION FORT POINT

The Golden Gate, magnificent in appearance on a sunny day with calm seas, can suddenly become treacherous to shipping. Fog, eddies, wind, storms, and strong currents have caused many disasters through the ages. Early in 1853 the wooden, side-wheel steamship *Tennessee* departed San Francisco bound for Panama. Because of a heavy fog, the captain "was unaware of the outgoing tide's strong current that swept *Tennessee* north past the gate and along the Marin shore." Suddenly, the crew spotted breakers and the captain ordered the engines reversed. But rocks blocked the vessel and the ship began to swing broadside toward the shore. The captain managed to beach the ship on a sandy cove thus avoiding a loss of life. Passengers were put safely on shore and the ship gave its name to the cove.¹

A month later Capt. William T. Sherman, 3d U.S. Infantry, on leave from the U.S. Army and returning to San Francisco aboard S.S. *Lewis*, experienced two shipwrecks in one day. On foggy April 9, in calm seas, the ship overran the Golden Gate and hit bottom on Duckworth Reef, Bolinas Bay, about eighteen miles above the entrance to San Francisco Bay. Passengers and crew got safely ashore. Sherman discovered a schooner loaded with lumber and he persuaded its captain to take him to San Francisco. As they approached Fort Point, "the force of the wind, meeting a strong ebb-tide, drove the nose of the schooner under water; she dove like a duck, went over on her side, and began to drift out with the tide." The vessel refused to sink because of the cargo of lumber, and Sherman, who had been thrown overboard, clambered back up the side. Soon, a small boat approached and took Sherman aboard, depositing him at the foot of Fort Point. The very wet captain walked to the Presidio thinking that two shipwrecks in one day was not a good beginning to his future career in the banking business.²

San Francisco also wrecked at the Golden Gate in 1853. As the clipper passed Point Bonita on the north side of the Golden Gate, she was caught in an eddy. Swirling about, the vessel hit rocks near the point on December 8. The badly damaged clipper anchored in Bonita Cove. Passengers got on shore safely but the

1. James P. Delgado and Stephen A. Haller, *Shipwrecks at the Golden Gate, A History of Vessel Losses from Duxbury Reef to Mussel Rock* (n.p., Lexikos, 1989), p. 89. Tennessee Cove is today within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

2. Sherman, *Memoirs*, pp. 94-99. Mrs. Sherman, returning East in 1855 aboard *Golden Age*, also was shipwrecked on the Pacific side of the Panama route. She and her fellow passengers were successfully rescued. Anna McAllister, *Ellen Ewing, Wife of General Sherman* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1986), pp. 123-131.

vessel filled with water. Plunderers, including soldiers from the Presidio, boarded the clipper. A storm hit the following day, drowning looters and leaving *San Francisco* a complete wreck.³

When the countless ships brought their gold-hungry passengers to San Francisco Bay in the 1850s, the United States undertook the construction of lighthouses on the Pacific coast. Not until the 1870s, however, were life-saving stations established on the coast. Long before then, one of the earliest organizations in the United States to extend aid to shipwrecked people was the Massachusetts Humane Society, which erected small unmanned huts along Massachusetts Bay in 1785. These huts contained a supply of firewood, food, and clothing. Soon the Society acquired lifeboats and by 1846 it had established eighteen lifeboat stations along the Massachusetts coast, each having a keeper and a volunteer crew. A year later the U.S. Congress established a system of lighthouses and revenue cutters. By 1854 volunteers had organized 137 lifeboat stations along the eastern coasts of the United States and the Great Lakes. The U.S. Treasury Department organized the Revenue-Marine Bureau in 1871 placing lifeboat stations under it and hiring full-time professional crews. Then, in 1878, the U.S. Congress created the U.S. Life Saving Service as a separate bureau under Treasury.⁴

Even before the establishment of the Life Saving Service, the Secretary of the Treasury had constructed a station at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park in 1877. The new Service's Twelfth District, i.e., the West Coast, prepared plans for two additional stations, near the Presidio's Fort Point and at Point Reyes north of the Golden Gate. These stations were eventually supplemented by lifesaving stations at Point Bonita in the Marin headlands and at the southern end of Ocean Beach in San Francisco. In January 1888 the Secretary of War W.C. Endicott granted a revocable license to the Secretary of Treasury Charles S. Fairchild for the erection of a station on the lower Presidio. On November 2, J.W. Meryman, the Life Saving Service's Pacific Coast superintendent of construction, announced that he had received the plans and specifications for a dwelling house for keeper and crew for each of the two stations.⁵

3. Delgado and Haller, *Shipwrecks*, pp. 58, 62, and 92. *Golden Fleece*, a clipper ship, was wrecked outside the Golden Gate at Fort Point on April 22, 1854. *Viscata*, an iron-hulled vessel, "came up broadside on the sands of Baker Beach," south of Fort Point on March 7, 1868. The Presidio's post returns showed no deaths among its soldiers for December 1853.

4. Walter C. Capron, *The U.S. Coast Guard* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1965), pp. 22-25.

5. Meryman, November 2, 1888, to S.J. Kimball, Life Saving Service, hereinafter cited as LSS, Letters Received, RG 26, NA; Toogood, *Civil History*, pp. 275-277.

James H. Coster of Baltimore, Maryland, won the construction contract for the Presidio station in February 1889 with a bid of \$11,000 and he promised to complete the work by September 1, 1889. An inspector visited the site on October 8 and found the buildings essentially completed but work had not started on the launchway. Finally, on February 14, 1890, the superintendent of construction announced completion of the station. A separate contract, won by L.D. Frichette of San Francisco, called for a fence on three sides of the station - 915 feet of picket fence and 140 feet of barbed wire. In July 1890 the Life Saving Service asked the Army's permission to erect a lookout tower on Fort Point. Col. William Graham, the Presidio commander, informed the 12th District that it could erect a ten-foot tower and install telephone communication with it. A few years later an army officer noted that the twenty-foot, wood frame tower stood 123 yards in front of gun 3, Battery Lancaster.⁶

The station crew was soon put to the test. *Elizabeth*, a 866-ton wooden ship on her seventh visit to San Francisco, arrived off the Golden Gate on February 21, 1891. The captain refused a tow through the Gate from a tug despite the bad weather. A strong eddy drove the vessel back toward Point Bonita where she went on the rocks. Water began to fill the ship but the captain's wife and family were taken off safely. The ship then drifted north, striking again at Tennessee Cove, then going ashore seven miles north of Point Bonita at the Big Slide Ranch:

Crews from the United States Life-Saving Stations at Golden Gate and Fort Point responded to the wreck, but their heroic efforts were doomed to failure. The Fort Point surfboat, in the tow of a tug, was swamped. Keeper Charles Henry washed overboard and drowned. Keeper Hollohan of the Golden Gate Park Station then took some of the Fort Point crew, crossed the bay to Sausalito by ferry and unable to secure horses . . . directed his men to harness themselves to the drag ropes of the cart, which, with its load weighed nearly a ton and a half, and started for the scene of disaster. The road led them over high hills and through deep ravines . . . but the faithful surfmen tugged on. . . . Horses were finally secured at Tennessee Ranch, and the party quickly reached the ocean shore at Tennessee Cove. Upon arrival, the exhausted life-savers found that *Elizabeth* had pulled free and drifted farther north. Continuing their trek along the rugged Northern Marin coast, they finally arrived at the wreck, too late to help. The life-savers had responded to the disaster in the best tradition of their service, only to be

6. [Illeg.], LSS, October 8, 1889, to Meryman; J.W. White, Superintendent of Construction, to General Superintendent S.I. Kimball, both in Records of USCG, 12th District, Alameda, CA; "Specifications for Fence," ca. January 1890, Records of USCG, RG 26, NA; "Supplement to Mimeograph number 43, Confidential," "General Correspondence, OCE, RG 77, NA; W. Graham, July 8, 1890, to T.J. Blakiney, PSF, Letters Sent, RG 393, NA.

thwarted by the weather.

Elizabeth had disintegrated, taking the lives of the captain and eighteen of the twenty-six-man crew.⁷

Two years later, *City of New York*, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's modern iron-hulled steamer, headed out through the Golden Gate on October 26, 1893. A heavy fog hid the tower light at Point Bonita and, suddenly, the vessel struck rocks at the point. The Fort Point Life Saving Station heard the signal cannon and immediately dispatched assistance. Because of the rocks, tugs could not approach the stranded ship, and the Fort Point Station's surfmen took all passengers off and transferred them to rescue craft. Assisted by the Golden Gate Park Station's crew, they also removed the steamer's cargo. Five months later, the hulk broke free from the rocks and sank in deep water.⁸

When Maj. William Harts prepared his master plan for the expansion of the Presidio in 1907, he recommended the removal of the life saving station from the lower Presidio to Baker Beach on the Pacific. He said that it was needed more on the ocean shore than on the bay shore because more wrecks occurred there. Moreover, when his plan to increase the size of the lower Presidio by dredging and filling was realized, the life saving station would find itself far inland. Time would show that Major Harts was but the first of many who wished the station moved.⁹

In 1914 the Life Saving Service merged with the Revenue-Cutter Service and the new organization became the United States Coast Guard, still under the Treasury Department. The station at the Presidio became the Fort Point Coast Guard Station and it was numbered 323. From a document called Assistance Reports one obtains a picture of the variety of tasks that came the station's way:

October 20, 1917. Picked up and towed a becalmed vessel that was drifting to sea.

September 1, 1919. Virginia, a hydroplane fell into the water from a height of 100 feet. Towed plane ashore. Hull and wings a total loss.

7. Delgado and Haller, *Shipwrecks*, pp. 99-101.

8. *Ibid*, pp. 102-103. In January 1894, the Fort Point life-saving crew rescued the crew of the schooner "barge" *Samson* that had been salvaging and dismantling *City of New York*. Caught in a storm, *Samson* had begun to drag anchor. The Fort Point Life-Saving Station spotted the distress signal and at great peril saved eight of the ten-man crew (two had already been lost).

9. Harts, *Report*, pp. 89-90.

February 22, 1921. A man jumped into bay from a moving airplane. Took him aboard and landed him on shore.

March 2, 1922. Boy fell over a high cliff. When found by the station crew he was bleeding profusely and incoming tide was washing over him.

March 17, 1922. Carried sick lighthouse keeper from the Farallone Islands to station and placed him in the care of Marine Hospital attendants.

September 1923. Stood by while the Seal Rocks swimming races were held.

April 19, 1924. Patrolled entrance of San Francisco Bay to prevent smuggling of liquor.

March 19, 1925. Recovered body of a male bather and attempted resuscitation.

April 7, 1925. Disposed of a dead horse that was on the rocks near Cliff House.

September 17, 1925. Two male bathers caught in undertow and drowned.

March 20, 1927. Rescued man who attempted to cross the Golden Gate in an air-inflated suit and was swept out to sea.

December 6, 1929. Stood by while a glider, in tow of plane, crossed Golden Gate. Glider crashed on Crissy Field, killing occupant.

September 28, 1933. Dragged for body of man whose clothing was found with a note to his wife.¹⁰

In 1914 work began on the construction of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition grounds on the San Francisco waterfront including the lower Presidio. The Fort Point Station became an obstacle to the exposition company's plans for it wished to construct a planked auto racetrack that would involve the same site. With everyone's agreement the company bore the cost of moving the station 700 feet west to its present location. Also, it cost the company \$19,000 to install a new steel boat launchway at the new site.¹¹

An army officer, writing in 1919, brought notice to the large men's quarters at the station. He said it

10. Howard V.L. Bloomfield, *The Compact History of the United States Coast Guard* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1966), Presidio. 127; U.S. Coast Guard, Assistance Reports, Roll 17, Microfilm 919, NA.

11. Todd, *Story of the Exposition*, 1:285.

measured about fifty-five feet square and contained two stories, adding there were also quarters for the "keeper" and several other small buildings.¹² By 1920, with the development of Crissy Field adjacent to the station, the U.S. Army Air Service began a campaign to have the station moved once again. Aircraft taking off from the field had to take off from east to west because of the prevailing wind, and had to gain sufficient altitude to get over the Fort Point bluff, 160 feet high, or make a right turn over the station buildings. In many instances the aircraft barely cleared the buildings. Estimated cost of moving the station east to the vicinity of the Presidio wharf came to \$73,000. Once again the Coast Guard was willing to move but it did not have the funds. Nor was Congress willing to supply the funding. The station stayed and aircraft continued to make their sometimes breath-catching turns.¹³

In 1940 the Army discovered that it had not issued a permit to the Coast Guard station when it moved in 1914. Hasty paper work, which included the station's metes and bounds, made everything legal on August 17, 1940.¹⁴

In 1952 the station felt the necessity to expand its facilities. Demands on its services had greatly increased with the closing of the Golden Gate and Point Bonita stations, leaving it the only one operating in the Bay Area. It considered that an area 150 feet wide and extending from Marina Drive to the bay would be sufficient space for new storage and shop facilities. The Army granted the request and a 1957 site plan showed a storage building to the east of the station building. A description of the station prepared in 1952 listed the buildings and structures: from west to east - 19.4 commander's garage, 19.3 commander's residence, 19.9 station building with boat room, 19.1 storage building, 19.15 shop building, and an unnumbered ammunition storage. The marine railroad ran from three boat tracks within the station

12. H.A. Halverson, October 8, 1919, to Department Air Service Officer, PSSF, Project Files, Airfields, Army Air Force, RG 18, NA.

13. R.Coast. Marshall, May 10, 1920, to Director of Operations, Project Files, Army Air Force, RG 18, NA. During the construction of the new Fort Winfield Scott, 1909-1912, the Quartermaster Department landed materials and supplies at the engineers' "torpedo wharf," 984, at Fort Point, causing overcrowding on the wharf's facilities. In 1913 the wharf was enlarged with the addition of a triangular section in the L and a rock bunker was erected on it. The 1915 exposition blocked the Quartermaster Department's old wharf near the Presidio's eastern boundary and again the engineers' wharf became congested. The result was the construction of a new quartermaster wharf with its large boathouse just to the east of the Fort Point Station's marine railroad about 1921. Now gone, this pier remained in use until after World War II. Chief of Engineers, October 19, 1915, to Adjutant General, General Correspondence 1894-1923, OCE, RG 77, NA.

14. R.L. Eichelberger, June 14, 1940, to CG, Ninth Corps Area, USCG Records, Real Property Branch, 12th CG District, Alameda, CA.

building and converged into a single track down into the water. A buoy shack with a latrine, 19.8, stood on the end of the pier. The description noted that the three-story station building had a fourth-story lookout. Inside the building the men maintained a small museum that contained nameplates, oars, and life rings from local wrecks.¹⁵

The Presidio's *Star Presidian* printed an article about the station on September 30, 1963, noting that the crew maintained two 40-foot speedboats and two 30-foot motor lifeboats. With the boats they supplied logistical support for the Mile Rock Light Station, Point Blunt Light Station on Angel Island, and the Alcatraz Light Station. An additional, nasty task was recovering suicides who jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge.

In August 1970 the Army gave permission to the Coast Guard to construct a hangar at the station for housing two experimental air cushion vehicles (ACVs or "Hovercraft"). The permit also involved additional pavement for parking, an approach ramp, flood lights, and the conversion of the paint storage building into an electronics shop. By 1972 the metal-clad hangar occupied a site on the east side of the station. A survey report at that time gave a brief description of the coast guard station:

Mission: boating safety, search and rescue, and aids to navigation; to provide one motor lifeboat and one air cushion vehicle twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week in support of Coast Guard missions.

Staffing: three (usually only one) officers and twenty-five men.

Facilities: two 44-foot motor lifeboats, two air cushion vehicles, and two highway vehicles.

Buildings: boathouse SF19, electrical repair shop SF15, engineer "mtl" shops CG1, crew berth/administration office CG2, commander's residence CG3, commander's garage CG4, ACV hangar CG6, and standby generator room CG10.¹⁶

The station came under attack briefly in 1973 when a newspaper reporter wrote an article, "Auto Rules on Scenic Beach." It noted that the Coast Guard maintained its buildings flawlessly but tolerated a broken

15. H.Coast. Perkins, January 2, 1952, to CG, Sixth U.S. Army, USCG Records, Real Property Branch, 12th CG District, Alameda, CA; File L-2, Master Plans, PSF.

16. Installation Utilization Survey Report, July 13, 1972; J.L. Fellows, August 17, 1970, to CO, 12th CG District, USCG Records, Real Property Branch, 12th CG District, Alameda, CA. The Coast Guard gave up the air cushion boats, which could do seventy knots, in 1973.

down motor pool (the enlisted men's parking lot) and junk on the beach in front of the station. The commander quieted the situation by cleaning up the beach and making the shore more accessible to the public.¹⁷

In 1974 the Coast Guard proposed removing the remaining portions of the 1914 marine railroad that had deteriorated greatly and had not been used since 1959. Following an inspection, California's historic preservation officer, William Penn Mott, Jr., agreed that removal would have no adverse effect. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation agreed.¹⁸

When the station's use permit came up for renewal in 1977, the changing times were marked by the Army Corps of Engineers preparing an "Environmental Impact Assessment." It noted that the station consisted of 3.11 acres of land and 1.8 acres of tide and submerged land. Its mission remained much the same: search and rescue operations, maintenance of short range aids to navigation, and recreational boat safety in and around San Francisco Bay, the bay entrance, and the coastal waters between Bodega Bay and Monterey. The buildings now consisted of: main building 8,100 square feet, garage/shop building 1,440 square feet, boatswain's locker 500 square feet, two-story (Dutch Colonial) house 2,100 square feet, former ACV hangar 5,100 square feet, and wooden catwalk 315 feet long with a 400 square foot boathouse. The assessment noted that public access had been provided to the beach via the Golden Gate Promenade.¹⁹

In 1984 the U.S. Coast Guard, by then within the U.S. Department of Transportation, informed the Army Engineers that it was designing an offshore breakwater and a new pier for the Fort Point station. It hoped to complete the project by the end of June 1987. Because of this sizable investment, it asked the Army if the revocable permit could be extended for longer than the usual five years. But the future began to take over the present. After much negotiation among the Army, Coast Guard, and National Park Service, the decision was reached that U.S. Coast Guard Station 323 would move to East Fort Baker in Marin County

17. *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, January 21, 1973. Golden Gate National Recreation Area had been established the year before probably bringing increased attention to the bay shore.

18. Mott, August 26, 1974, to E.G. O'Keefe, USCG Records, Real Property Branch, 12th CG District, Alameda, CA.

19. "Environmental Impact Statement," June 14, 1977, USCG Records, Real Property Branch, 12th CG District, Alameda, CA.

and construct new facilities there. The decision resulted in a detailed real property inventory in 1986:

CG2, station house, wood frame, pre-1915, four stories, administration, mess, barracks, and gallery. In the past it had contained a boathouse. Major rehabilitation in 1983.

CG3, officer's quarters, wood frame, ca. 1890, two stories, residence. Recent rehabilitation.

CG4, officer's garage, wood frame, ca. 1890, one story. Had once been a boathouse.

CG6, ACV hangar, metal frame, 1970, one story, now engineering shop, tool crib, workshop, and office, condition good.

CG1, carpenter shop, wood frame, ca. 1930s, one-story, carpenter and hobby shops.

CG 15, paint locker, wood frame, ca. 1930s, one-story, now storage, condition fair.

CG10, emergency generator building, wood frame, one story, condition fair.

CG19, boat house, access pier, wood deck and timber piles, condition bad.

CG20, small boat dock, wood deck and timber piles, mooring for two-three boats, condition bad.

CG12, seawall bulkhead, concrete 1935, shore portion fair.²⁰

Once the announcement of the move became public, a local tug-of-war developed. The Army announced that it wanted the station's buildings for guest quarters and warehousing. The officer's residence with its four bedrooms would be ideal for a colonel or a major. The six bedrooms and six bathrooms on the second floor of the station building would make great bachelor officers' quarters, while the six large rooms, without latrines, on the main floor could be BOQs for "geographical bachelors"(?). The facilities were in excellent shape, if a little remote from the main post. Meanwhile, the National Park Service had concluded that the station should become a part of the national recreation area and the Army could lease it. In the end the station became a part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the station building became a park rangers' dormitory.

For almost one hundred years the Fort Point Life Saving Station had protected those who traveled on the seas, rescuing them from dangers, educating in the ways of sailors, and providing aids to navigation. One of several in the beginning, it became the sole station for the Bay Area and the water beyond. Its traditions and its accomplishments live on in its successor across the bay.

20. File P-4, Master Plans, PSF; Commander, 12th CG District, August 31, 1984, to Army Corps of Engineers, USCG Records, Real Property Branch, 12th CG District, Alameda, CA.